

# *Checks on Migrant Children by Homeland Security Agents Stir Fear*

Agents are showing up unannounced to interview minors in what the government calls “wellness checks.” Critics see the visits as part of the immigration crackdown.

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Miriam Jordan reported from Los Angeles and the Big Island of Hawaii. Christina Jewett reported from Washington.

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For more than a decade, unaccompanied children fleeing hardship have journeyed north from Central America and crossed the Mexico-U.S. border. Many of them have been allowed to stay in the United States, and the government has spared most of them the full weight of immigration enforcement.

Under the Trump administration, more of those children are coming face to face with federal agents.

From New York to Hawaii, agents have been showing up unannounced at schools, homes and migrant shelters to interview the children.

The Trump administration has called these surprise visits “wellness checks” intended to ensure that the children are enrolled in school and being properly cared for. But the agents conducting the visits are not social workers or child welfare specialists, nor are they labor inspectors or truant officers.

Rather, the agents are primarily from Homeland Security Investigations, a specialized unit of Immigration and Customs Enforcement that combats drug and weapons smuggling, cybercrimes and financial crimes.

When federal agents looking for children arrived unannounced at two Los Angeles elementary schools last month, they were turned away.

“My very first question starts there,” the superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, Alberto Carvalho, said at a news conference. “What interest should a Homeland Security agent have in a first grader or a second grader? A third grader or a fourth grader, for that matter?”

Children who arrive in the United States alone have long faced risks, and as their numbers surged, concerns about their well-being have grown. Most of the minors are living safely with family members, but some have fallen prey to labor traffickers and other exploitation.

Now, though, the Trump administration’s use of criminal investigators for these checks has stirred anxiety among immigrants and has alarmed educators, advocates and lawyers, who see the visits as a tactic to accelerate deportations.

“These so-called wellness checks are really about immigration enforcement,” said Marisa Chumil, of the Young Center for Immigrant Children’s Rights, who described them as “a pretext to locate, interrogate and deport children and families.”

Tricia McLaughlin, a spokeswoman for the Homeland Security Department, said that in the course of these checks, agents have detained some caregivers who are in the country unlawfully. In cases where there were no other adults authorized to care for the children, agents have placed the children in government care, according to Ms. McLaughlin, who did not specify how many adults or children had been detained as a result of the visits or whether any of them had been deported.

She said the government's efforts were driven by concerns that unaccompanied minors were at risk of sex trafficking and other exploitation. She cited two cases, including a man wanted for "attempted aggravated homicide" in Guatemala who was approved to be the sponsor of a 14-year-old relative.

The visits are being spearheaded by the Homeland Security investigative unit, but like many aspects of the Trump administration's crackdown on immigrants, the checks are being carried out with assistance from other federal agencies, including the F.B.I. and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Most troubling to critics of the checks is the involvement of a federal social services agency that has previously operated independently of I.C.E. and other law enforcement entities. The agency, the Office of Refugee Resettlement, is a division of the Health and Human Services Department, and has the principal legal responsibility for the welfare of unaccompanied minors.

Detaining and deporting immigrants has not been part of the resettlement agency's mission, but documents reviewed by The New York Times show that the agency has hired at least seven detention and deportation specialists in recent weeks.

Andrew Nixon, a Health and Human Services spokesman, said that the Trump administration had moved away from the Biden administration's stance against collaboration between the Office of Refugee Resettlement and law enforcement agencies.

"Our top priority is to protect vulnerable children and uphold the rule of law," Mr. Nixon said.

Unaccompanied children began arriving in the United States in significant numbers about a decade ago, coming mainly from Guatemala and Honduras, two countries that are plagued by high levels of poverty and violent crime.

With the help of lawyers, many of these children have won the right to remain in the United States permanently by proving that they were abandoned or persecuted in their home countries.

Some 800,000 unaccompanied minors have been placed in shelters overseen by the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the last decade, putting enormous strain on the agency. As arrivals soared in recent years, children were released rapidly to avoid overcrowding, and in some cases the adult sponsors who signed up to care for the released children were not thoroughly vetted.

A Times investigation found that warning signs about what became of the children went unheeded, and some children were employed illegally to do dangerous work like cleaning slaughterhouses overnight.

The Homeland Security Department's inspector general said last May that 291,000 unaccompanied minors had fallen off the agency's radar.

Since President Trump took office in January, his "border czar," Tom Homan, has spoken of 300,000 "missing" children, suggesting that they might be victims of sex trafficking and labor exploitation, and demanding that they be found.

Lawyers and other advocates who work with unaccompanied immigrant children say the administration's stated aims are belied by its history with migrant children. During Trump's first term in office, thousands of children were separated from their parents at the border in a bid to deter migration. Since he retook office, his administration has taken other steps, including seeking to end federal funding for legal representation for minor immigrants.

"They could be targeting the kids to go after the adults," said Alexa Sendukas, managing attorney at the Galveston-Houston Immigration Project. "If they take kids into custody or arrest their parents, it will be another family separation."

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the Health and Human Services secretary, said his agency was cooperating with Homeland Security to locate migrant children. Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

At a congressional hearing this month, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said his agency was engaged in “unprecedented” data sharing with Homeland Security in an effort to track down “every single one of these kids.”

Ms. Sendukas said that agents had made unscheduled visits to 21 minors, some as young as 6, who are represented by her nonprofit and in the process of obtaining legal status.

Maria, a Guatemalan immigrant who has been in the United States for several years, was expecting an air-conditioner technician last month when the doorbell rang. She cracked open the door and came face to face with two tall men, she recalled.

They asked Maria if the 17-year-old boy shown in a photo on a document they carried was there. The teenager is a relative whom Maria sponsored, and whom an immigration judge has ruled is no longer subject to deportation.

“I was petrified,” said Maria, 28, who is not authorized to be in the United States and spoke on the condition that only her first name be used.

She confirmed her identity to the agents, and the 17-year-old relative came forward. The men asked additional questions in English, which she did not understand, she said, and then they left. Moments later, she noticed the agents taking photographs of her apartment through the windows.

“I didn’t know what was going on,” Maria said. “I thought they might take us.”

Christian Santana, a lawyer in Tacoma, Wash., received a call in early May from a Homeland Security Investigations agent, requesting that Mr. Santana arrange a meeting with his client, a 9-year-old girl. The meeting took place in a room at a public library.

With Mr. Santana serving as interpreter, the agent asked the girl to identify the woman beside her — her mother. The agent then asked the mother if her child was enrolled in school, and whether the girl was healthy. The interaction lasted only a few minutes.

“This agent seemed to have the best intentions,” Mr. Santana said, “but that might not always be the case around the country.”

The expansion of wellness checks is one of many policy changes and legislative proposals with significant consequences for children in the immigration system.

The Trump administration’s move in late March to take congressionally appropriated funding away from nonprofits that provide legal services for such children has been blocked in court, at least temporarily.

This month, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld a lower court’s order to restore the funding, but the litigation is continuing.

In the meantime, though, many children have already lost their counsel, and studies have found that they are significantly less likely to succeed in their cases if they lack legal representation.

The House Judiciary Committee has approved budget language that would make it costly for people to sponsor unaccompanied minors. The proposals include requiring a \$5,000 bond to ensure court appearances, a new \$3,500 fee to sponsor an immigrant, a \$1,000 fee to apply for asylum, and other charges.

Jennifer Podkul, chief of global policy and advocacy at Kids in Need of Defense, said the cost would prevent parents and other family members from reuniting with their children, and raise the risk that the children will be stranded in shelters.

“In the short term, it’s going to mean kids who need protection might not get it,” Ms. Podkul said. “And in the future, I think what it means is that the United States will not be a place able to receive and care for unaccompanied children on the move in dire need of international protection.”

Jeremy Singer-Vine and Luis Ferré-Sadurní contributed reporting.

**Miriam Jordan** reports from a grass roots perspective on immigrants and their impact on the demographics, society and economy of the United States.

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